



Pitts, F. H. (2020). The Multitude and the Machine: Productivism, Populism, Posthumanism. *Political Quarterly*, 91(2), 364-372.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12852>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1111/1467-923X.12852](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12852)

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# **The multitude and the machine**

## **Productivism, populism, posthumanism**

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### **Abstract**

There has been a proliferating literature on postcapitalist and post-work futures in recent years, underpinned by policy proposals like the basic income and a reduction in working hours. It has gained increasing uptake within left electoral politics and policymaking. The generational potency of these ideas require that we understand their theoretical roots. This contribution considers the interplay between the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and the new postcapitalism exemplified by the likes of Paul Mason and Aaron Bastani, as well as its relationship with intellectual currents around Corbynism and the wider contemporary left. Through a discussion of their latest book, *Assembly*, it will be seen that Hardt and Negri both inform and are increasingly informed by the postcapitalist and post-work thinking popular on the left today – in particular at its ‘posthumanist’ fringes. However, this recent work is characterised by a series of tactical redirections that rather than indicating renewal reflect the potential collapse of this utopian framework for the future in the face of a rapidly unravelling global political context. Whilst the determinist understanding of social transformation cannot permit these setbacks, this shines a light on more general shifts in left strategy and analysis.

### **Introduction**

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s now long-running series of books on the development of political power and resistance in contemporary capitalism have had a recurring and sometimes surprising relationship of influence and reflection with radical left politics over the past twenty years. *Empire* and *Multitude* combined eulogies to the transformative potential of the New Economy with a theorisation of the alterglobalisation struggles ensuing at the turn of the millennium.<sup>1</sup> *Commonwealth* and *Declaration*, meanwhile, traced the emergence of the post-crisis social movements that took the horizontalist politics of those earlier struggles into public spaces and popular imaginaries.<sup>2</sup> Hardt and Negri’s works have both tracked and trained successive generations of radicals, conceptualising and informing what have largely been extraparliamentary experiments in grassroots alternatives.

Most recently, however, the themes running through their work of the technological affordances of contemporary capitalism for new forms of networked political subjectivity and the potential for a postcapitalist transformation have propelled themselves into the political mainstream through the futurist fringe of the new transatlantic electoralist left arranged around Jeremy Corbyn and, to a lesser extent perhaps, Bernie Sanders.<sup>3</sup> Aspects of how Hardt and Negri understand the work of Karl Marx – specifically his techno-utopian ‘Fragment on Machines’ – and Spinoza – the theorisation of a new class subject, the ‘multitude’, that compels capitalist development – resonate in a fresh strand of post-work, post-capitalism, sometimes post-humanist left thinking around automation, platforms, and policies like the Universal Basic Income and Universal Basic Services.<sup>4</sup> In

particular there is a close interplay between the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and the new postcapitalism or ‘fully automated luxury communism’ exemplified by the likes of Paul Mason and Aaron Bastani, as well as its relationship with intellectual currents around Corbynism and the wider contemporary left.<sup>5</sup> In *Assembly*, the latest instalment in Hardt and Negri’s continuing engagement with capitalism and its alternatives in the contemporary time, the authors absorb some of the insights of the new thinking they helped nurture.<sup>6</sup> Whilst this hardens the technologically determinist and post-humanist tenor of their work, the interweaving of this imaginary with an electoralist ‘institutional turn’ brings Hardt and Negri to distance themselves from the horizontalist politics absorbed and informed in their previous works – with some surprising if ultimately unsatisfactory results.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, these tactical redirections, rather than indicating renewal, reflect the potential collapse of this utopian framework for the future in the face of a rapidly unravelling global political context. Whilst their determinist understanding of social transformation cannot permit these setbacks, this turning point shines a light on more general shifts in left strategy and analysis.

## **Multitude and machinic assemblages**

*Assembly* begins with an empirical assessment of the contemporary conditions of labour and production that resonates through the rest of the book’s wider political and economic arguments (xix-xx). This assessment will be familiar to readers of any of Hardt and Negri’s seminal series of previous works, where it performs, although sometimes with different stresses and language, a similar function in setting up the wider lines of argumentation that follow. First, they state, contemporary capitalism is dependent on forms of ‘social and natural wealth’ initially shared in common but increasingly expropriated and valorised by capital. This implies that capitalism is an alien imposition on a pre-existing, prelapsarian naturalness that in some way survives, withstanding subsumption.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, the dependence of capital upon the common is expressed in the changing face of labour, the hegemonic forms of which exhibit cooperation, knowledge, care, affect and creativity to a much greater degree than in previous economic settlements. This, for Hardt and Negri, draws from the common and creates new commons insofar as it works from and on the production and reproduction of human relationships. This also grants labour a degree of autonomy from ‘capitalist command’ insofar as it is ‘animated’ by life beyond the workplace and the employment relationship. Third, technological developments like digital algorithms are decentralising the capacity to gather and store knowledge such that networked young workers create and appropriate their own forms of ‘fixed capital’ pivotal to the kind of capitalist production Hardt and Negri see as decisive today. Fourth, this shift from traditional industries to business models based on the extraction of value from the common, whether natural or social, is not necessarily one where the latter becomes quantitatively dominant but rather a story of the qualitative significance of certain forms of activity and industry. Fifth and final, these changes at the productive base of capitalist society cascade upwards to impact upon how power governs and how resistance is organised, granting the latter autonomy and independence by means of the ‘multitude’ of digital and immaterial labourers who work with and upon the common, and the former a reactive and dependent existence vis-a-vis the latter.

A distinctive feature of *Assembly* that gives a hint towards the dual human and non-human allusions of the book's title is the reimagining of the multitude's heterogeneous political subjectivity along the lines of the 'machinic assemblages' taken to characterise contemporary capitalism. This marks a development of Hardt and Negri's work that, like the turn to political organisation and electoral politics elsewhere in the book (276), seems to respond to how some of the same ideas Hardt and Negri have been working with previously have been picked up and applied by left movements and intellectuals in recent years, acquiring new resonances. The Spinozian 'plane of immanence' on which Hardt and Negri situated social actors and phenomena in earlier works reappears today in the ontological equivalence accelerationists and post-humanists posit between human and non-human entities – whether people, machines, plants, animals, inanimate objects and so on (122).<sup>9</sup> Through a combination of the Silicon Valley search for technological singularity and the application of its academic abstractions in a reinvigorated left-wing political sphere sensing possibility in a technological future, this way of framing the world has attained a real and possibly dangerous social and material dynamism in the present day.

Where the multitude names the collection of human 'singularities' Hardt and Negri have previously seen as politically pivotal, in *Assembly* they laud the transformative possibility of machinic assemblages as collections of both human and non-human singularities. For Hardt and Negri, machinic assemblages connect human and non-human beings on a plane of ontological equivalence, recognising the 'subjective' character of both living and non-living things (122). What makes these assemblages radically transformative for Hardt and Negri is their absorption of 'young people today' whose 'existence is resistance' and productive of 'subjectivity and forms of life' (123). A key respect in which humans are brought into the fold of the forces of production for Hardt and Negri is the manner in which networked young workers today create and engage their own 'fixed capital' through the mobile information and communication technologies dispersed into their hands, concentrating knowledge and cooperative capacity (238). Bearers of an autonomous productive input all of their own, they thus assume their place in the digital-human assemblage Hardt and Negri associate with the contemporary forces of production; simultaneously, the same 'fixed capital' is 'integrated into workers' bodies and minds and becomes their second nature' (119).

Whereas the earlier presentation of the 'multitude' similarly theorised its transformative possibility around the immeasurably productive character of the immaterial labour it performed – the production of subjectivity and forms of life there relating to the kinds of work typical of the nascent New Economy in fields like the creative industries – here the transformative possibility of the machinic assemblages is theorised around the immeasurably productive character of what Hardt and Negri label here 'algorithmic labour' centring on the 'new' New Economy of digital platforms and gig work. For instance, whereas once they ascribed to immaterial labour a tightening feedback loop between production and consumption, they can now read into platforms like Google and Facebook the extension of this as users become autonomous producers of data valorised by the firm (119).

In an adaptation of the orthodox Marxist understanding of the unfolding of capitalist development, the 'human machines' Hardt and Negri see as 'put to work' in contemporary

capitalism (109) represent what might be characterised as the 'forces of production' which push against the 'relations of production' - namely, the property relations that conflict with the common, cooperative basis of value production in the digital age. As Hardt and Negri write,

Private property appears increasingly as a fetter to social productivity both in the sense that it blocks the relationships of cooperation that generate production and that it undermines the social relations that are its result. (147)

Somewhat at odds with the rejection of dialectics elsewhere in Hardt and Negri's work, this is a classic restatement of the traditional Marxist 'fettters' view of history whereby the forces have an *a priori* agency constrained by the imposition upon them of capitalist social relations. The relations are reshaped through the development of the forces as the former become insufficient relative to the latter, such that '[c]apitalist developments in logistics are always a response to the rebellious, uncontrollable forces of production' (177-8).

By a theoretical sleight of hand, however, Hardt and Negri combine the Marxist orthodoxy of the fetters view of history with the legacy of Italian operaismo's 'copernican inversion', whereby capitalist development is seen as driven by class struggle (76).<sup>10</sup> Rolling the multitude into the technological forces, capitalist social relations themselves are seen as mere 'reactions to resistance and revolt' on the part of autonomous human agents, whose labour is rendered ontologically prior to and independent of its secondary engagement by capital through the capture of the value it creates after the fact (155, 117). Whereas the forces of production have typically been seen as consisting of 'fixed capital' - machines and the knowledge encoded in them - here the forces are expanded to encapsulate human life itself. This is because humans and machines are not opposed forces but 'belong to the same ontological plane'. 'Human culture' is no barrier to 'supposedly inhuman' technologies, but the two are intertwined (110). It is necessary, Hardt and Negri suggest, for humans to enrol themselves into the forces of production through immersion in 'the heart of technologies' against the relations that dominate and expropriate the results of the immense productivity of algorithmic labour and digitally-enabled social cooperation (111).

The difference between Hardt and Negri's negated dialectic of forces and relations and that found in orthodox Marxism is that for the former there is no promise of resolution or unification out of the social conflict and resistance that powers it, only 'permanent crisis and continual imbalance' (75-6). This, it is fair to say, foolproofs what was formerly, in *Empire* and *Multitude*, the sense that a new world was being built in the shell of the old, and were only it to be liberated from the relations constraining it, all would be well. Moreover, Hardt and Negri appear keen to distance themselves from the uptake of their ideas in the fashioning of schemes for imminent automated utopias and the like, noting that the tendency of machines is not to liberate humans from work but to create new and more routinised forms of work that render the worker more like a machine than a human. The digital age has only exacerbated these tendencies by facilitating a 'Digital Taylorism' just as rationalising as the original. Meanwhile, they suggest, the chances of 'computer systems, artificial intelligence, and algorithms' rendering human labour obsolete altogether are also mitigated by the incapacity of the technology as currently constituted to perform a whole host of tasks necessary to the performance of most existing jobs (131). Their argument, therefore, is not technologically determinist – technology cannot

accomplish things alone. But it sees no alternative in a humanist response to the issue. Instead they sense revolutionary possibility in the combination of human and technological factors; a dynamic assemblage wherein each reshapes the other.

## **Productivism and populism**

The productivist understanding of labour and value that permeates Hardt and Negri's account (94) has a political significance insofar as it celebrates and seeks the extension and reward of the multitude's productiveness through social cooperation, access to knowledge, the commoning of resources and wealth and the combination of human and non-human forces in the digital age (xvi). As far as Hardt and Negri see it, the issue faced is the insufficiency of current property relations to properly recognise and accommodate the social and 'common' character of production (94). In the context of these property relations, Hardt and Negri pose the multitude as a productive majority ruled over by 'an extreme minority' that leeches upon the value they create (xviii). In this respect the multitude resembles a postmodern version of the 'people' of which populist politics purports to be the representative. Indeed, they claim not to 'doubt the sincerity or intelligence of many right-wing activists' protests against the elites of finance, global institutions and national government', suggesting that there are elements of this populism that 'could be recuperated by intelligent left-wing movements' because they mark an attack on the forms of property that Hardt and Negri identify as being responsible for plundering the productiveness of the multitude (52) – in much the same way as populisms of left and right posit various parasitical forces leeching on the national people from outside. In this, they follow contemporary political rhetoric in drawing sharp divides between productive and unproductive social actors:

On one side are all those who live on the interest generated by the financial markets and seek to preserve exclusive access to the private property they accumulate. On the other side are those who produce social wealth through their collective knowledges, their intelligence, and their social capacities to communicate, care for, and cooperate with each other, who seek security through free and open access to the common they have produced. These are battle lines. (175)

This kind of friend-enemy, inside-outside binary distinction is central to the age of populism – and the coincidence between the terms of the distinction, resting as they do on the rightful inheritance of what is produced against parasitical outside forces – plays with fire politically, bearing a structural similarity to anti-welfare, anti-migrant, anti-rentier, anti-globalist and conspiracist anti-finance binary rhetoric. There is a common format driving the claims made on value across the political spectrum. This being said, Hardt and Negri are at pains to stress how the 'multitude' is not a synonym for the people, but a radical completion of the impossible project of populism, which depends upon 'the fantasy of a unified people' (35). Indeed, where they criticise contemporary populism it is for the tendency of populist political projects to ossify social movements in state power, and not in anything specific to the propagation of a popular will in and of itself (23).

Where Hardt and Negri accept the need for the seizure and wielding of power it can be so only on the condition that its leadership 'serve the productive multitude' (xv) through a

narrowing of the relationship between 'rulers and ruled' (289) - a demand that in itself mirrors the relationship between charismatic strongman leaders and the hardworking national communities they purport to represent. In this relationship, the overarching strategy is set by the led with the leader responsible only for its 'tactical execution' (291). How far this could hold in an age of authoritarian populism and one in which unpredictable desires are expressed at the ballot box, or in referenda, is another question. More widely, there is a rejection of representation of all kinds in *Assembly*, and specifically of representative democracy and its institutions (5-6, 31-2, 37, 289). Associated with this is a tech-positive appreciation of how information and knowledge exchange have been opened up in the contemporary age (128) - an innovation that has arguably presented deleterious consequences for public understanding and debate, with conspiracy theories, genocide denialism and healthcare quackery all following in the wake of the populist ascendancy. This is a politics of removing limits, of removing boundaries, of removing processes that translate immediacy into something mediated.

In this way the demands for direct democracy and openness to different forms and modes of knowledge – demands which echo from their previous work through the post-crisis social movements that terminated in the present electoralist return to representation on the left – is underpinned by a wider attack on the concept and practice of mediation in Hardt and Negri's work, in favour of a radical immediacy. This is in part ontological, insofar as the Spinozian immanence at the heart of their worldview rejects dialectical understandings of a mediated reality.<sup>11</sup> And it is in part political insofar as their worldview rejects forms of political mediation - for instance, where, in *Assembly*, it is claimed that politics is just a 'surface' that obscures from view what really matters in social life itself (xv), or where Hardt and Negri ridicule the kind of impersonal 'mediatory apparatus' that typifies power and the suspension of social conflict in bourgeois society (125-127). The former ontological rejection of mediation has a philosophical basis – seeing reality itself as untouched by mediation – and a historical basis in that the networked sociality and cooperation of contemporary production resist organisation and representation (37). For instance, whereas money performed a mediating function vis-a-vis class struggle under Keynesianism, it can no longer mediate the 'uncontained, overflowing force' of the power multitude wields, which 'wells up from the field of social conflict', exceeding all limits (189, 81).

## **From spontaneity to organisation**

The question is whether mediation can be done away with so easily – are not the 'assembly' forms of politics associated with Hardt and Negri's thought themselves mediations, just different ones? And is unmediated experience and social life even possible at all? Interestingly, *Assembly* presents a politics of institution-building and 'antagonistic reformism' that, contrary to the book's philosophical claims, trades in new and alternative mediations of the individual, society and the state.

One of the striking features of Hardt and Negri's *Assembly* is the shift from a politics based on the spontaneous resistance of the multitude to one based on its concerted organisation. The multitude appeared in their earlier work as an inchoate and limitless collective subject surpassing the narrow confines of proletarian class identity to

encapsulate everyone and everything, whilst retaining the essential position of the proletariat in classical Marxist theory as an ontologically and epistemologically privileged revolutionary subject – something affirmed in *Assembly* through a sympathetic discussion of Lukacs's defence of orthodoxy (73-4). Identified as the positive force driving capitalist development, the likes of *Empire* and *Multitude* placed few boundaries upon what could and could not be associated with the agentic energy of the multitude. However, as the hype of the New Economy and the new social movements that accompanied it subsides for an altogether bleaker global picture, *Assembly* sees this narrative hedged. Here, the multitude 'designates a radical diversity of social subjectivities that do not spontaneously form together but instead require a political project to organize' (69). This means 'constructing the multitude "institutionally," that is, transforming the social experience of the multitude into political institutions' (133). For a theoretical worldview previously presupposed on an attack on mediation in the name of immediacy, this marks a significant step change not only from Hardt and Negri's earlier work, but also from the way it has been received and applied among the contemporary left.

Early on in *Assembly*, Hardt and Negri state that it is a mistake to translate critiques of leadership into a refusal to institutionalise power; and a mistake to replace verticality with an unstructured horizontality (xiv). Hardt and Negri write that their own theoretical insights 'have been cited to support a generalized refusal of organization'. They bemoan the way in which their analyses of the changing quality of labour in contemporary capitalism have led scholars to see a spontaneous resistance inherent in the productive activities of the multitude with no need for organisation and institutionalisation. They even distance themselves from the translation of the concept of immanence that dominates their previous work into a 'refusal of all norms and organizational structures' and a voluntaristic individualism (7). In a significant development from the likes of *Empire* and *Multitude*, they ask us to focus not on spontaneity itself but the structures and work that makes it possible (21).

This appears aimed at adherents of the earlier works, but in reality retrospectively tracks the existing trajectories of the left radicals who owe the most to Hardt and Negri's earlier work. From Seattle through to Occupy through to Corbyn and Sanders, we have witnessed an anti-statist, anti-national, horizontalist and globalist inclination give way to a new settlement with the attempted seizure of state power through party-led electoral projects operating within a national frame of reference posed against the global as an expression of capitalist power – from 'changing the world without taking power' to a realisation that 'in order to change the world we need to take power' (69). As Hardt and Negri put it, the aim of this new left is to 'create a model of constituent democracy in which differences are able to interact and together create new institutions: against global capital, against the dictatorship of finance, against the biopowers that destroy the earth, against racial hierarchies, and for access to and self-management of the common'. The institutional turn represents a break with the prefigurative politics Hardt and Negri in part helped inspire, which they themselves now criticise as overly focused on the 'creation and reproduction of the community of activists' as the crucible of political action, uprooted from the realities of the world around them, and hamstrung by a moralistic culture of 'internal policing' (275) – tendencies arguably left intact with the transition of a generation of activists into the electoral sphere.



The apparent irony of the trajectory of 'constituent power' towards electoralism and institutions frames *Assembly's* attempt to bring coherence to what in reality has been a pragmatic response on the part of the left to a series of contingencies and wider political trends, namely the failure of the post-crisis protest movements and the sublation of their critical and organisational characteristics within an insurgent national populism on left and right. The trouble with this is that once one takes an immanentist view of all social principles united on a plane of ontological equivalence, and grants parties or organisations the power to lead and command this 'multitude', it becomes very hard to reconcile what falls outside or afoul it. The volte face in *Assembly* away from spontaneity, horizontalism and voluntarism and towards organisation, centralisation and leadership runs the risk of applying the underpinning philosophy to practical problems in such a way as to render more and not less potent its defects. If Hardt and Negri really do stand by their earlier work's advocacy of immediacy and immanence against mediation and the dialectical playing out of contradictions, granting leaders and organisational structures primacy within this heady political mix would appear to suggest a kind of personalised, charismatic politics the likes of which are already in the ascendancy the world over under the banner of authoritarian populism.

The turn towards structure and organization comes not completely out of the blue in the context of Hardt and Negri's wider output. Even in *Empire*, the powerful argument climaxed in the recommendation of policies like a universal basic income that implied the seizure of some measure of power in capitalist society. But where in *Empire* such demands jarred with the tenor of the rest of the book – an attack on old-school projects for state power winding up in the relatively timid call for radical instantiations of it – in *Assembly* the connection is more fully fleshed out, simultaneous with contemporary shifts on the actually-existing left that have accomplished a temporary resolution in practice of contradictions that were at the time of *Empire* largely theoretical. Hardt and Negri are here unabashed in their recommendation of 'reformist action' (256), with reform posed as a 'non-sovereign' alternative to revolutionary search for sovereign power.

Whilst the politics of prefiguration comes in for a bit of a hiding in *Assembly*, there is still a residual commitment to an open politics of 'counter powers' that would appear to reject the possibility of an authoritarian or totalitarian outcome of these tendencies (133). Hardt and Negri's previous work cast a surprisingly positive light on capitalist transformation as an expression of the desires and creative drive of the multitude – tantamount to an affirmation of capitalist development that willed the acceleration rather than deceleration of political, economic and organisational change as onward steps toward a postcapitalist society lurking in the present. In the context of this well-established feature of their work, a major shift in tack in *Assembly* is the augmentation of a 'project of subjectivication' focused on 'constituent power' with one based on 'destituent power' – not a creative force propelling capitalist development but one sabotaging and pegging it back (223). However, the latter exists ultimately in service of the former by clearing the way of obstacles to what Hardt and Negri describe as 'capacities for innovation' – returning to an idea common in this literature that there are potentialities awaiting to be unleashed were it not for capitalist social relations (224). Accomplished with the assistance of destituent power, constituent power in turn 'paves the way for a new constituted power' that overturns the 'relationship between representation and democracy' by 'reducing to a minimum the separation between rulers and ruled' (289). The move from destituent power to constituent power to

constituted power is presented as a three-prong strategy of *exodus*, withdrawing from dominant institutions; *antagonistic reformism*, transforming existing institutions; and *hegemonic strategy*, creating new institutions (274).

Hardt and Negri's theorisation of constituent power takes on a particularly persuasive light when associated with the 'counterpower' role assumed by 'free worker institutions' like unions in Fordist society, recommending that today too 'democratic institutions must organize counterpowers and keep open and plural the developments of constituent power' (289). Strip away the intellectual architecture, and this is a call for a strong and healthy civil society between the citizen and the state – a feature of liberal democracies increasingly at risk in the current time. Indeed, the citation of the New Deal– Roosevelt's stimulation of labour organisation and collective bargaining a recurring theme in the operaist and postoperaist tradition – highlights how a model of counterpowers contains greater political possibilities than some of the other examples given like the Bolshevik revolution and the Chinese Cultural Revolution (254-55). It is presented as a straight-up means for capitalism to be reformed from below, and a path to possibly circumvent the historical association they note between traditional socialism and the simple seizing of an unreconstructed state power in the name of the 'public'. Indeed, the call for 'non-state public power' (278) comprising 'non-sovereign' institutions resonates at a time where a one-sided view of sovereignty has such political significance.

The translation of destituent power into constituent power, and constituent power into constituted power, is pitched around an assault on sovereignty – a buzzword of populists left and right – in the name of 'nonsovereign' institutions that retain the dynamic movement between power and plural counterpowers, and do not situate a sovereign power to rule over 'society and the state' (256-7). Whereas 'the people or the nation or the proletariat can be sovereign [...] when it speaks with one voice', the pluralistic multitude 'can never be sovereign' (26) - an important clarification in light of how close the multitude runs to both the people and the proletariat. Citing the examples of 'non-sovereign' power sought by the Kurds in Rojava or in the anticolonial self-determination projects of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor (38-39), they also distance themselves from any connection with the political horizon of the nation-state throughout, much as in their previous work seeing it as insufficient to address the global character of the 'capitalist world market' (32-33, 263). This is associated with a wider critique of the statist turn on the contemporary left, which whilst 'eminently pragmatic' in their view, seeks an 'unrealistic' alternative to 'neoliberal globalization' in the absence of the objective material conditions that made Keynesianism and state socialism possible in the twentieth century (43).

## Conclusion

The trouble with the concept of 'constituent power' driving societal change is that it is posited not merely as a 'political insistence' but rather as an 'ontological consistency', which even 'during periods of seeming calm' is 'accumulating potential like a battery storing up an electric charge in wait for its next release' (36). The convenient claim that constituent power is always accomplishing itself even where and when it cannot be seen leads to a kind of undisproveability akin to that of the classical Marxist teleology that the

arc of history bends favourably towards the proletariat – the argument thus made, it becomes impossible to reasonably argue against it. The difference is that, as Hardt and Negri put it, this teleology is an ‘immanent teleology’ constructed from below (233). Those who would argue, meanwhile, and who might seek to offer a more tempered, less optimistic appreciation of the affordances of the present conjuncture, are dismissed by Hardt and Negri as akin to ‘some evil genius’ whispering in the collective ear that ‘the conditions in the world today are not propitious’ for the kind of hopeful politics *Assembly* presents (xvi). It might be said that Hardt and Negri’s tactical and strategic shifts in *Assembly* conceal the destruction of the utopian potentialities upon which their political framework has previously rested. But despite this conceptual collapse, the underlying theoretical understanding of historical and social change cannot allow for any sense of being set back by circumstances.

Provocatively, Hardt and Negri present themselves as the realists in this context, because ‘political realism consists in recognizing the tendency animated by the movements of contemporary society, illuminating the desires embedded in them’ (284). The trouble with this ‘realism’ and the movements it describes is its uprootedness from any empirical basis in a world going badly wrong. Whilst all around lose their heads, the ‘realists’ are usually claimed to be those Hardt and Negri dismiss as suggesting only a vital centre can ‘save democratic politics and its institutions from radical and irrational challenges’ (246). But Hardt and Negri would suggest that it is contrarily the *idealistic* route to recognise the political limits posed by this state of affairs, the rise of authoritarianism, nationalism and populism, and the generational defeat of liberalism and the left at the present time. If it is idealist to look out at the world unravelling and cast doubt on Hardt and Negri’s overexuberant claim that we have ‘finally managed to shrug off the rags of modernity’ (29), then so be it. Let the realists indulge a future that may or may not come – and leave the idealists to confront the present.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*. London: Penguin, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Declaration*. Argo-Navis, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Matt Bolton and Frederick Harry Pitts, *Corbynism: A Critical Approach*. Bingley: Emerald, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Harry Pitts, “Beyond the Fragment: postoperaismo, postcapitalism and Marx’s ‘Notes on machines’, 45 years on,” *Economy and Society*, 46(3-4), 2018, pp. 324-345; Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*. London: Penguin, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism*, London: Allen Lane, 2015; Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*, London: Verso, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Hardt, M., and Negri, A., 2017. *Assembly*. Oxford University Press. All page numbers given in brackets within the text.

<sup>7</sup> For the institutional turn see Keir Milburn and Bertie Russell, “What can an institution do? Towards Public-Common partnerships and a new common-sense,” *Renewal: A Journal of Social Democracy*, 26(4), 2018, pp. 45-55.

<sup>8</sup> See Bolton, this issue.

<sup>9</sup> For critical accounts see Paul Mason, *Clear Bright Future*. London: Allen Lane, 2019; Frederick Harry Pitts and Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, “Corbyn’s conveyor belt of ideas: Postcapitalism and the politics of social reproduction,” *Capital and Class*, 41(3), 2017, pp. 423–434; Jon Cruddas, “The humanist left must

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challenge the rise of cyborg socialism.” New Statesman. 23 April, 2018. Available from: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2018/04/humanist-left-must-challenge-rise-cyborg-socialism>

<sup>10</sup> Harry Cleaver, “The Inversion of Class Perspective in Marxian Theory: From Valorisation to Self-Valorisation,” In: *Open Marxism Vol. II: Theory and Practice*, edited by Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn and Kosmas Psychopedis, 107-144. London: Pluto Press, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Harry Pitts and Jon Cruddas, “The Age of Immanence: Postoperaismo, Postcapitalism and the Forces and Relations of Production,” *School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies Working Papers* 01-20. University of Bristol, 2020.